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Global climate change and public policy

9.1 U.S. GOVERNMENT POLICY ACTIONS AND INACTIONS

Over the past two or three decades, climatologists issued repeated warnings in press releases and other media emphasizing the putative dangers associated with global warming from increasing greenhouse gas (GHG) concentrations. Al Gore’s film An Inconvenient Truth (see Appendix I) had a major public relations effect. The U.N., through the Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) as well as several other of its agencies, issued many reports and other media to support the alarmist viewpoint. Published materials, including some rather bizarre forms of the hockey stick were circulated to hundreds of millions of schoolchildren. The U.N. took the lead in organizing the international community to take action in setting goals and standards for reducing carbon emissions. Some of this is discussed in later sections of this chapter. In the U.S., perhaps predictably, Democrats reacted favorably and introduced legislation to control future emissions, while Republicans remained skeptical and opposed stringent measures proposed by Democrats.

Wikipedia\(^1\) provides a summary of U.S. federal actions in response to this media blitz on climate change. Some of the material below is taken from this website. However, the Wikipedia article portrays a fictitious conspiracy by special interests to subvert the good intentions of climate alarmists, whereas the material below has a different spin.

In 1997, the U.N. passed the Kyoto Protocol to reduce future emissions, although it excepted developing nations. The U.S., although a signatory to the Kyoto Protocol, neither ratified nor withdrew from the protocol. The signature alone is symbolic, as the Kyoto Protocol is non-binding on the U.S. unless ratified. The U.S. was, as of 2005, the largest single emitter of carbon dioxide from the burning of fossil fuels. China has since taken over this honor in the 2011 time frame. China was given a free hand to emit under the Kyoto Protocol.

On July 25, 1997, before the Kyoto Protocol was finalized (although it had been fully negotiated, and a penultimate draft was finished), the U.S. Senate unanimously

\(^1\) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Climate_change_policy_of_the_United_States.
passed (by a 95:0 vote) the Byrd–Hagel Resolution, which stated that the sense of the Senate was that the U.S. should not be a signatory to any protocol that did not include binding targets and timetables for developing as well as industrialized nations or this “would result in serious harm to the economy of the U.S.”. On November 12, 1998, Vice President Al Gore symbolically signed the protocol. Both Gore and Senator Joseph Lieberman indicated that the protocol would not be acted upon in the Senate until there was participation by the developing nations. The Clinton Administration never submitted the protocol to the Senate for ratification.

President George W. Bush also did not submit the treaty for ratification, partly because of the exemption granted to China. Bush also opposed the treaty because of the strain he believed the treaty would put on the economy; he emphasized the uncertainties that are present in the climate change issue:

“In October 2003 and again in June 2005, the McCain-Lieberman Climate Stewardship Act failed a vote in the US Senate. In the 2005 vote, Republicans opposed the Bill 49-6, while Democrats supported it 37–10.”

The Global Warming Pollution Reduction Act of 2007 was introduced in the U.S. Senate. However, the Bill died in committee.

The American Clean Energy and Security Act of 2009 was approved by the House of Representatives by a vote of 219:212, but died in the Senate.

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) did a good job of cleaning up America in the latter decades of the 20th century. As the 21st century began, the need for an EPA diminished. A cynic might conclude that the EPA seized upon control of emissions of GHGs as a new cause célèbre to justify its continued existence. Republicans naturally opposed this. In March 2011, the Republicans submitted a Bill to the U.S. Congress that would prohibit the EPA from regulating GHGs as pollutants. However the EPA continues to oversee regulation of GHG emissions under the Clean Air Act. The U.S. Supreme Court unwisely affirmed the notion that CO₂ is a pollutant and therefore emissions can be legally regulated by the EPA.

In 2001 and 2002, the Bush Administration continued previous U.S. policy of not implementing the Kyoto Protocol, but proposed a much more limited plan to reduce emissions by providing tax credits to businesses that use renewable energy sources.

In 2006, Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger said: “We simply must do everything we can in our power to slow down global warming before it is too late. . . . The science is clear. The global warming debate is over.” This seems to confirm his nickname as “The Terminator”.

In October 2007, Chairman Dingell’s Energy and Commerce Committee of the U.S. Congress released its first White Paper in a series on “Meeting the Climate Change Challenge”. This was claimed to be “the next step in the legislative process leading to enactment of a mandatory, economy-wide climate change program”. The essential basis for this program is the belief that: